

Ex-teacher cites vow, stays mum on sex charges

Rochester woman says he abused her at Kearney

By Steve Mills and J. Leslie Sopko
Staff writers

A former teacher at Bishop Kearney High School said yesterday that he wanted to defend himself against allegations he sexually abused a Rochester woman for nearly 30 years, but had been ordered by his superiors not to discuss the charges.

Brother John Laurence Heathwood said he was telephoned yesterday by Brother James Moffett, the head of the Congrega-

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tion of Christian Brothers of Ireland in the eastern United States, and told not to discuss Nancy Maher's allegations or her \$7 million lawsuit.

"I took a vow of obedience," Heathwood said from Hawaii, where he was with relatives. "I would love to answer everything she's saying, but I simply can't. I can only do what my superiors tell me to do."

Heathwood, a math teacher and drama coach at Bishop Kearney for a decade in the 1960s and 1970s, did say, however, that he has never acknowledged abusing Maher.

Maher's lawyer, Richard A. Kaul, has said that Heathwood confessed to the alleged abuse in conversations with his superiors.

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A day after allegations of sexual abuse surfaced against a former Bishop Kearney High School teacher, supporters of the accused and his accuser expressed powerful reactions yet remain deeply divided over who they believe.

While Brother John Laurence Heathwood was uniformly described as an extremely popular and charming teacher — even a "genius" — a second Rochester

woman came forward to claim she was the victim of inappropriate sexual contact.

Barbara Zak, 41, a 1970 Bishop Kearney graduate, said Heathwood tickled and spanked her in a school office, and told her she should become a Playboy bunny. At the time, Zak was a teen-ager and did not complain to authorities. But 10 years later she confronted Heathwood at the school's class reunion in 1980.

"I asked him if he remembered it and if he got enjoyment out of it," Zak said. "I said, 'I want you to look me in the face and tell me yes or no.'"

"He looked me in the face and said no," Zak recalled, in an interview yesterday. Heathwood, reached in Hawaii, said he had a "vague" recollection of Zak but denied any wrongdoing.

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"That's not true," said Heathwood.

Maher, who now is 40, charges in the lawsuit that Heathwood sexually abused her from the time she was 12 years old until as recently as July 1992. A Bishop Kearney student from 1966 to 1970, Maher alleges that Heathwood's abuse left her unable to conceive children.

Bishop Kearney, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester and the Christian Brothers also were named as defendants in the lawsuit, although the diocese has said that it should be dropped from the lawsuit because the school is run by the Christian Brothers.

Bishop Kearney principal Sister Elaine Englert yesterday issued the school's first statement on the matter, saying it was important to note it had been nearly 20 years since Heathwood had taught at the school. The school, she said, received no inquiries from parents or alumni yesterday.

"The main thing we're doing right now is praying for the brother and certainly praying for the woman, too," she said.

The Christian Brothers, meanwhile, said in a statement that Heathwood would not be allowed to teach until the matter was resolved.

His most recent assignment was at Bishop Hendricken High School in Warwick, R.I., where he taught the 10th and 11th grades.

"We acknowledge that one of our members, Brother J.L. Heathwood, has been accused of sexual impropriety while at Bishop Kearney High School 20 years ago. We are genuinely concerned for the accuser and the accused," said the statement.

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"No way," he said.

Zak's allegations followed reports yesterday that Nancy Maher, 40, of Rochester, had filed a \$7 million lawsuit against Heathwood accusing him of 28 years of sexual abuse that left her severely physically and emotionally scarred. Maher's lawsuit alleges she was the victim of many deviant sexual acts, including rape.

Zak said her contact with Heathwood was limited to his fondling.

Maher and Zak — who remain acquaintances today — were Bishop Kearney students from 1966 to 1970. Heathwood taught mathematics and was head of the drama program at Bishop Kearney from 1964 to 1974.

Heathwood said he was forbidden by his Christian Brothers superiors to talk about the allegations.

"I can't control what people think," he said. "I would love to defend my name, but I can't."

Ray Shahn, who was the school's musical director while Heathwood was in charge of



Alta Eisenstat/Alta Staff photographer

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dramatic productions, said yesterday that Maher's allegations "blew my mind."

Shahn said he looked up to Heathwood, who had recruited Shahn to come to Bishop Kearney. Shahn called him a "genius" who was devoted to students and the plays he produced and directed.

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Also, Edward Tracy, who was principal at Bishop Kearney from 1967 to 1972, said Heathwood was one of the most enthusiastic of teachers and "totally into the school." He said Heathwood spent countless extra hours working there. Tracy said he never received a complaint about Heathwood.

"I don't see him as that kind of a man," said Tracy, who is now principal at De Sales High School in Geneva, Ontario County.

But Zak said the atmosphere in Heathwood's office — a popular place for students to hang out — was far less rigid than in other areas of the school, and that Heathwood often got "a little too close."

"I was in his office and he'd stand at the door so I couldn't get out," recalled Zak, a former Student Council member who often

used Heathwood's office to type school newsletters.

"He'd press his body up on me, and he'd tickle," she said. "It was like a game."

As a young girl, Zak said, she remembers thinking that Heathwood was simply being very playful and affectionate. "When you're a kid, you don't put a label on it as sexual," she said. She said she often felt uncomfortable but did not consider telling anyone.

"You just didn't question authority. I was raised that way from the first grade. The church was good and you were there to learn values and morals," Zak said. "Everyone sent you (to parochial school) to prevent you from getting hurt in the world."

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Still, Heathwood's supporters are skeptical of any allegations against him.

Brother James Liguori, principal of Bishop Hendricken High School, in Warwick, R.I., where Heathwood most recently taught, said Heathwood was an exemplary teacher and one of the school's most popular. Liguori said students never made any complaints against Heathwood.

That, as well as Maher's delay in reporting the alleged abuse, prompted him to question the charges in her lawsuit.

"And she just decided at this time to come forward?" Liguori asked.

"Very strange." □

the Rhode Island school June 10, following final exams. The school principal, Brother James Liguori, described Heathwood as a "dedicated" teacher and said he was one of two instructors honored in end-of-term ceremonies.

Kaul said that he was assured by Christian Brothers officials that Heathwood had been immediately removed from his teaching job and referred for counseling in April after

the Brothers learned of Maher's claims.

But Heathwood and Liguori insisted yesterday that Heathwood finished out the school year.

"It was nothing out of the ordinary," said Liguori. "He retired and ended the school year as every other teacher did. He was not taken from the classroom."

Heathwood, who is in his mid-60s, taught at Bishop Kearney from

1964 to 1974. He also was very close to Maher's family.

Maher, who has not filed criminal charges against Heathwood, alleges that the sexual abuse began in a bathroom when she was 12. It continued through high school — sometimes backstage in the Bishop Kearney auditorium — then through adulthood.

She also accused Heathwood of making lewd comments and trying

to humiliate and prey on Maher's feelings of "degradation and helplessness" by using threats.

The alleged rapes and deviant sexual acts caused physical injuries, including scarring of her cervix that left her unable to conceive children, said the lawsuit.

Maher claimed in the lawsuit that she also suffered several psychological conditions.

Those include chronic post-trau-

matic stress disorder, dissociative disorder, nightmares and panic attacks, as well as eating and sleep disorders. She has been in psychotherapy since last fall.

Maher, contacted yesterday at her home, declined to be interviewed, then left town. But she said she felt that the truth about Heathwood had finally come out.

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